TUI T. SUTHERLAND

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WINGS OF FIRE

WINGLETS #3 – DESERTER

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by

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DESERTER

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT FROM WINGS OF FIRE: LEGENDS: *DARKSTALKER*

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Note: This story begins before the War of SandWing Succession and ends shortly after the events of Winglets: *Assassin*.

Unlike most dragons, Six-Claws had a remarkably happy childhood.

His mother was one of Queen Oasis's most trusted guards and his father was the head chef in the queen's kitchen. Ostrich and Quicksand's lives were devoted to the queen, but Six-Claws and his two sisters came a close second. The family was almost always together.

His mother taught him how to keep watch and how to fight and how to defend his queen at all costs. His father taught him how to make camel shish kebab and date soufflé. His sisters, meanwhile, taught him that you should really not tell your sisters who you have a crush on, unless you want the entire palace to know about it.

Six-Claws loved growing up in the SandWing palace, surrounded by open sky and rolling desert dunes as far as the eye could see in every direction. He learned to fly earlier than any of the other dragonets who hatched in his year. He signed up for every patrol, whether it was harvesting brightsting cacti or hunting desert foxes or firebombing suspected dragonbite viper lairs. He liked to be useful. He liked to be *doing* things.

And of course, since his parents were loyal to Queen Oasis, he was loyal to her as well. If anyone asked, he could have rattled off a list of reasons why she was a great queen. This was a conversation he heard regularly around the dinner table in the small barracks room assigned to his family.

It wasn't until he was five years old that he learned there might one day be a different SandWing queen.

That is, he knew intellectually, from school lessons, that a queen's daughter, granddaughter, sister, or niece could challenge her to a fight to the death, and whoever won would be queen. But he'd never imagined anyone

doing that to *his* queen.

He was in the kitchens that afternoon, pounding beetles into a glittering black powder for his father, when his mother came in. She nudged Six-Claws affectionately with her wing as she passed him. His father looked up from one of the cauldrons, steam obscuring his face.

"Did you hear?" Ostrich asked him. "Another princess hatched today. The queen is calling her Blaze."

"Really?" Quicksand dragged a tray of bread loaves out of the oven. "She's keeping it, then?"

"Her Majesty has always said she'd allow three heirs, no more," said Ostrich, taking the other edge to help him lift it onto the stone table. "So if she keeps Blaze, one of the others has to go."

Quicksand snorted. "That's easy. The one who likes cutting the legs off jackrabbits just to see what they'll do." He wrinkled his snout. "There was one flopping around the courtyard shrieking for an hour yesterday. Do you know how hard it is to stuff olives under those conditions?"

"She's creepy," Ostrich agreed, "but the one Queen Oasis *should* get rid of is the other daughter, Blister. That dragon always looks like she's murdering you with her eyes. But it won't be either of them. It'll be the queen's sister, you'll see. She's much closer to challenging Her Majesty than the daughters are. It makes sense to dispose of her."

"Challenge the queen?" Six-Claws interrupted, startled out of eavesdropping. "Why would anyone do that?"

"To become the next queen," Quicksand answered with an amused expression. "Because she thinks she'd be better at it than the current queen."

"No one could be a better queen than Queen Oasis!" Six-Claws insisted forcefully.

"That's absolutely right, dear," his mother said, wrapping one wing around him. "Don't worry, I'm sure she'll be queen for a long while yet. Although whoever comes after her, we'll be loyal to her, too."

Ostrich was right about one thing: by the next day, the queen's one remaining sister had vanished into thin air, and nobody ever mentioned her name again.

After that, Six-Claws watched the SandWing princesses differently. Now they weren't just royalty. They were deadly. They were a threat to his queen.

Well … two of them were.

The youngest daughter, Blaze, turned out to be one of the silliest dragonets Six-Claws had ever met. As soon as she could walk she started following any dragon she could find who was wearing treasure. The more sparkles, the better; she had a knack for zeroing in on the dragons with the most glittering jewelry.

Six-Claws suspected that if she ever killed her mother, it wouldn't be for power or a throne; it would be for a pair of diamond earrings. And she wouldn't do it with her claws or her fire — she'd do it by annoying the queen to death.

He watched the princesses for two years, but his first interaction with them didn't come until he was seven years old …

"My sisters are up to something."

Six-Claws looked up, squinting at the figure silhouetted against the blinding sun. He'd been trying to dig out a stubborn ball of roots from the palace garden for the better part of the morning. His muscles ached and his scales were hot enough to fry snake eggs on.

"Sisters are always up to something," he said, resting his arms on his shovel.

"True. But whatever *my* sisters are planning could bring down the kingdom." The other dragon turned his head into the light, and Six-Claws tensed, recognizing Prince Smolder. The prince was from the same hatching as Princess Blister, so he was two years older than Six-Claws. They'd been on several missions together, although they'd rarely spoken to each other.

And he was right. *His* sisters were not ordinary dragons.

"Which sisters?" Six-Claws asked. "How do you know?"

"Burn and Blister," said the prince. "They've been whispering together all morning."

That was definitely a bad sign. The two older princesses generally avoided each other as much as possible. If they were conspiring, that could only mean bad things for someone.

"Why are you telling me?" Six-Claws asked cautiously.

"Well," Smolder said, "I'm not sure what else to do. You seem kind of strong and sensible. I was hoping you could come up with something." He

flicked his venomous tail around and sat down with an expectant expression.

"You should ask them what they're up to," Six-Claws suggested, jabbing at the root ball again. "You're their brother. They might tell you."

"Ha ha!" The prince gave an odd shudder. "And draw their attention to me instead? No, thank you, that's not how survival works in this family."

Six-Claws considered for a moment what it must be like to live in a family where "survival" was an issue of sibling dynamics. "They can't be going after the queen," he mused. "Not together. But I could warn my mother, just in case."

"Who else would they be plotting against?" Smolder wondered.

Realization hit Six-Claws like a lightning bolt. "Your little sister," he said. He dropped the shovel and his wings snapped open. "Knock the number of heirs down to two." He scrambled out of the hole, shaking dirt off his claws. "Where is Blaze?"

"How would I know?" Prince Smolder jumped out of the way of the cascades of dust coming off Six-Claws. "So you'll take care of it?"

"Aren't you going to help me?" Six-Claws frowned at the prince. "Don't you want to protect your little sister?"

"I am!" Smolder shifted warily on his talons. "By telling you, and then staying alive so I can do it again next time! I'm sure you can handle it." He took another step back, then turned and hurried off into the palace.

"Wait!" Six-Claws called. "What about your brothers? Where are they?"

"Out on patrol," Smolder yelled back before he whisked around a corner and vanished.

Six-Claws heaved a frustrated sigh. He didn't have time to run after a cowardly prince. Apparently he had to find the youngest princess before something terrible happened to her. Which did not sound like his job at all, but unlike Smolder, he wasn't the kind of dragon to pass it off to someone else.

The wingery was close by; he could check there first. Most dragonets in the palace played in the shelter of its walls until they were two years old, under the watchful eye of a pair of ancient SandWings. Six-Claws remembered their creaky voices telling stories about how they'd taught young Oasis to fly when she was just a tiny mite herself. The wingery was open to anyone who lived in the palace, so the children of servants and nobles all

grew up together — princesses and future pot-scrubbers side by side.

With no time to waste, he hopped onto the wall of the garden and flew there instead of taking the cooler indoor passageways.

The courtyard for the dragonets featured a sunken pool in the middle, where they could splash and cool off in the midday heat. This was overlooked by a shaded pavilion with long white curtains on the three open sides. Six-Claws had spent two painful years in that pavilion, struggling to learn to read and to count little piles of red pebbles. Sitting still for that long was the worst. That was not his idea of doing something; that was just torture.

The rest of the courtyard was set up to help the dragonets learn to fly: ledges at different heights, soft piles of sand to land in, claw holds and perches everywhere. And of course, in one corner, a first aid station stocked with lots of brightsting cactus, which was the only antidote to the venom in a SandWing's tail. The venom didn't come in until a dragonet was closer to three years old — luckily for everyone — but at this age they had a tendency to crash into everything or leap onto their parents without looking first, so there was a lot of bandaging and antidote-administering required. The young dragons also spent a *lot* of time practicing how to be aware of their tails and everyone else's, so they could eventually be safely released into the rest of the palace.

Six-Claws flew down into the courtyard, scanning the pool and the flying stations. No sign of Blaze. She had just turned two, so she might consider herself too old for the wingery now, but he couldn't think where she might go next. He stuck his head between the curtains of the pavilion and an entire class of SandWing dragonets twisted around to stare at him.

"Yes?" snapped the wizened old dragon at the front.

"Is Princess Blaze here?" Six-Claws asked.

The teacher snorted. "Do you see anyone drawing tiaras in the margins of their history scrolls? Then, no."

"Do you know where she might be?"

"My guess? Drooling over a pile of gems or sharing adoring sighs with a mirror somewhere," he snapped. "Stop interrupting our lesson."

"I can help you look," offered the dragon beside the teacher, and Six-Claws noticed him for the first time. He was older than the other dragonets, probably about four years old, with powerful sandy-yellow wings and

flashing black eyes.

"Your mother said to stay here and learn the job," the teacher growled.

"Oh, but this sounds *very* important," the other dragon answered, practically leaping over the little dragonets between him and Six-Claws. "I'm sure I'll be back soon!" He seized Six-Claws by the arm and muttered, "Let's go, quick."

Six-Claws backed out of the pavilion and jumped to the nearest balcony. The young dragon followed him, ignoring the wheezing shouts of the teacher, and then they both soared up to one of the higher palace towers. The wind tugged at their wings with unusual strength, and when Six-Claws glanced up, he realized the sky was darker than it should be for midday in the desert.

"Thank you for getting me out of there," the dragon panted as they landed. "I'm Dune."

"Six-Claws. What was that all about?"

Dune immediately looked at Six-Claws's talons — yes, he had six claws on each of his front feet instead of the usual five; thanks so much for letting everyone know right away, parents — and then tried very hard to pretend that he hadn't. "I'm supposed to be in training to become a teacher. My parents are both teachers, and they think working in the wingery forever would be just the perfect job for me." He wrinkled his snout.

"You sound thrilled about that idea," Six-Claws said. He was only half listening; his attention was on the palace compound spread out below him as he searched for any sign of the littlest princess. Far off on the western horizon, a wall of ominous clouds was gathering.

"I guess minding dragonets runs in the family," Dune said. He shuddered. "But I hope I don't have to do it for the rest of my life. Dragonets are so aggravating. I want to be a soldier! I want to fight in battles and do glorious things and be a hero!" He flared his wings enthusiastically. "What do you want to do?"

"Whatever my queen needs me to do," Six-Claws answered, with complete honesty. He wanted to serve his tribe and be the most useful dragon he could possibly be. "Now think. Where could Blaze be?"

"The royal treasury," Dune said promptly. "Hoping her mother will come by to unlock it so she can roll in the jewels. That dragonet is as bad as a scavenger. I'm not sure she thinks about anything except treasure, and she

doesn’t even care about which items are worth more than others. We tried to turn her obsession into a math lesson, but she prefers the prettiest ones, even if they’re fake.”

“Go check the treasury,” Six-Claws said. He turned toward the other side of the tower, intending to search the other pools — but then something caught his attention.

A flash of light out in the desert.

A tremor of movement across the sand.

A small dragonet, trekking out toward the incoming storm.

“What is she *doing*?” he yelped. He couldn’t tell for sure that it was Blaze, but whoever it was needed to get back to the palace right away.

“Whoa,” Dune said, squinting beside him. “Is that the princess? Why would she be out in the dunes by herself? By all the lizards, she is going to get *crushed* by that sandstorm.”

“Get help,” Six-Claws said. He shoved Dune back and spread his wings. “Tell the queen, if you can.”

“You’re going to *get* her?” Dune said. “Why? You’ll *both* get crushed.”

“Because you never leave dragonets in danger,” Six-Claws answered, startled that anyone would need to have that explained to him.

“You don’t? Even if it means risking your own — all right, all right,” Dune said, cutting himself off at the look on Six-Claws’s face. “No dragonets in danger, got it.”

Six-Claws threw himself off the tower and soared over the palace and out into the desert, beating his wings as fast as he could.

He was lucky to be strong and fast. By the time he caught up to Princess Blaze, the wind was whipping furiously around them, flinging harsh particles of sand into their eyes. But she was still struggling onward, walking instead of flying, her wings tucked in and her head bent and her eyes closed.

Six-Claws landed in front of her and spread his wings, shielding her from the storm for a moment. She rubbed her face and looked up at him, blinking in surprise.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“To get my favorite crown,” she said spiritedly. “Don’t you try to stop me, you big-shouldered bighead!”

He tilted his head. “What crown?”

“The one Agave stole and hid out here, according to Camel, who heard it from Parch, who is her best friend, so it’s completely true, and I’m going to get it back, because it’s MINE and Mommy gave it to me.” Blaze suddenly sat down and lifted her chin. “Unless you go get it for me. Ooo, *that* sounds like a good idea.”

“We can’t,” he said. “This storm is too dangerous.” *And I’m guessing that whole story is a lie planted somewhere along the way by Burn and Blister,* he thought. “You must get back to the palace.”

“NO!” Blaze shouted. “I *want* what’s *mine.*” She tried to stomp past him, but the wind immediately seized her wings and flung her backward onto the sand.

“Ow!” she cried, trying to sit up. “That hurt! Something hurt me!”

Six-Claws looked over his shoulder. An enormous wall of dust clouds was bearing down on them, reaching from the sand all the way up to the sky and moving fast. There was no more time to treat the princess like precious royalty.

“We have to go!” he shouted. He threw his arms around her, pinning her wings to her sides, and lunged into the air.

“My croooooooooowwwwwn!” she wailed. She plunked her head on his shoulder and cried all the way back to the palace.

The princess was heavier than she looked, but the wind was with them now, hurtling them in front of the storm. As they got closer, Six-Claws could see doors and windows slamming closed all over the palace. The dragons were preparing for the onslaught of sand.

Wait, he thought desperately. *Wait for us. We’re coming.*

And then finally, as his strength began to give out and he felt the cloud right on his tail, he saw a shutter open in one of the walls. Dune leaned out, waving a huge white cloth to get his attention.

Six-Claws put on one last burst of speed and threw himself through the open window, tucking himself to crash-land on the floor with Blaze on top of him. They skidded part of the way across the room, and he could hear the cries of dragons leaping out of their way.

“Did you bring the *entire* desert in with you?” one of them yelped.

“Idiots! Waiting till the last minute!”

“Don’t you know anything about sandstorms?”

“We should have left you out there!”

“Hey, that’s Princess Blaze,” said someone else, and a kind of hush fell over the room.

Six-Claws blinked, feeling sand cascading from the corners of his eyes. His vision was still blurred, but he could see that they were in one of the great halls where Oasis hosted feasts and dances. Normally sunlight filled the hall, but it was dark with all the shutters and doors closed, and only a few torches had been lit so far. Circles of warm firelight reflected off the scales and dark eyes of the dragons gathered around them.

He let go of the princess and sat up, trying to catch some of the sand that slid off his wings before it made even more of a mess on the floor.

“RrrrrrROAR!” Blaze shouted, shoving him away. She jumped to her feet and shook herself vigorously, covering him and the room and the dragons around them with even more sand. “You ruined everything and now I’ll never find it! MOOOMMY!!!”

“Your mother is overseeing the sandstorm lockdown,” said a tall, burly dragon, shoving through the crowd to stand over her. “So you can tell *me* what exactly you were doing so far outside the palace.”

Blaze puffed up her chest. “You’re not the boss of me!”

“I’m one of them,” he said sternly. “I *am* your father.”

Six-Claws tried to rub away the grit in his eyes so he could see better. Char was the queen’s husband, referred to by most SandWings as the king, although he had only as much power as Queen Oasis let him have. Sometimes he went everywhere with the queen, welcomed into advisory meetings and diplomatic gatherings, and then sometimes they would fight and he’d be exiled from the palace for months at a time.

According to Six-Claws’s parents, it was safest to be polite and respectful to Char, but never get too close, because you wouldn’t want the queen to associate you with him the next time Char fell out of favor.

As Blaze launched into a long, complicated story about her friends and her stolen crown, Six-Claws turned and found Dune behind him, wide-eyed.

“That was alarming,” Dune said. “I thought you weren’t going to make it back.”

Six-Claws shrugged. “We did. I’d better go shake off this sand in one of the baths.”

“Father,” said a cold voice, slicing through Blaze’s breathless narrative. “Shouldn’t we ask the name of the dragon who took our little sister out into such terrible danger?”

A chill like midnight in the desert slithered down Six-Claws’s spine. He watched the crowd part around Princess Blister as she stepped forward. Her obsidian-black eyes raked over Six-Claws. He could practically see her mind analyzing him and fitting him into a category — something like *Irksome Nuisance* or *Idiot Who Ruined My Plan.*

“He didn’t take her out there!” Dune said, raising his tail defensively. “He *saw* her out there alone and *rescued* her, that’s what he did!”

“Ah,” said Blister. Her tail rattled softly on the floor. “Really. What a hero.”

“Right,” said Dune, subsiding. “That’s what he is. His name is Six-Claws. And I’m Dune, by the way.”

“SIX-Claws?” Blaze interrupted. She wriggled out of her father’s arms and flounced over to inspect Six-Claws’s talons. “Ew! Three moons! You really do have six claws on each foot! That’s so weird! I can’t believe you touched me with those!” She leaned closer to stare at the extra claws, then jumped back quickly when he pulled his talons into his chest.

Six-Claws felt as if his face was burning. No one had made fun of his odd talons in years, not since his first month in the wingery. He’d always worked hard to prove that it made no difference — he was as valuable as any other dragon. It didn’t change anything about what he could do. It just … looked odd.

“Yeeeeeeee,” Blaze said scornfully. She held out her own perfect, beautiful talons, decorated with three glittering rings. “I’m so glad *I* have the right number of claws.”

Right then, deep in his heart, Six-Claws decided that he sincerely hoped Blaze would *never* be queen of the SandWings.

“I’m sure what my daughter is trying to say,” Char interjected, “is thank you for saving her life.” He gently steered Blaze away from Six-Claws, toward the mirrors across the hall. The little SandWing took one look at herself, gasped in horror, and stormed off toward the baths, radiating outrage.

“We should reward such a brave hero,” Blister purred, slithering an inch closer to Six-Claws. “I can think of a few missions he’d be *perfect* for …”

A few missions I'm not likely to come back from, Six-Claws thought with a shiver.

"I have a better idea," Char said, cutting her off. Blister narrowed her eyes at him, but he didn't seem to notice. "Brave and strong and a swift flier for your age — how would you like to join the army, Six-Claws? We could use a soldier like you. You could make your way up to captain pretty fast, maybe general one day."

"If that's what the queen wants, sir," Six-Claws said. It was probably safer than whatever Blister had in mind for him. His mother would approve. And soldiers were useful, weren't they? Even in times of peace, like now, there were always skirmishes going on with the SkyWings or IceWings.

"I'll see to it," Char said with a nod.

Something jabbed Six-Claws in the side and he whipped around, tail up, before realizing it was Dune, with a very meaningful expression on his face.

"Uh," Six-Claws said. "My, um … my friend Dune helped, too."

"Oh, yes?" said Char. "Would you like to join the army as well, dragonet?"

"Yes, please, sir!" Dune said eagerly.

"Hmmm. You're a bit young, but we can put you in basic training for now. I'll have you two assigned to the same battalion." Char nodded again, looking pleased with himself, and wandered away.

Outside, the wind was howling and rattling the shutters with enormous fury. Six-Claws had a feeling he'd be sweeping sand out of every crevice in the palace tomorrow.

Except he wouldn't be, if Char did as he'd promised. He'd be in soldier training instead, set on a path to a new future. With a new best friend, apparently; Dune was beaming from ear to ear, as though Six-Claws had saved *him* instead of Blaze.

He felt eyes watching him, and when he turned, he saw Blister fix a malevolent glare on him before she slipped out of the room.

I mustn't forget I have a new enemy now, too.

And a new reason to hope that Queen Oasis lives for a very, very long time.

The night Queen Oasis died, Six-Claws and Dune were off duty. That is, they

were not scheduled for any soldiers' duties, but they were on duty in a different way: watching over a weeping prince to make sure he didn't do anything regrettable.

"She's gone," Smolder sobbed, plunking his head on his arms and flopping his wings over the table. Several glasses of cactus cider went crashing to the floor and shattered around their talons. "I'm never going to see her again."

Smolder's two brothers exchanged an exasperated glance over his head.

"That's your own fault," said Singe. He nudged a shard of glass away from his feet and beckoned for Dune to sweep it up. "If you hadn't made it so serious, Mother wouldn't have had to intervene."

"You *know* how she feels about any of us getting married," Scald agreed. "You've always known it."

"Yeah, it's a simple policy," said Singe. "No marriage, no dragonets, no extra heirs causing problems. As long as we follow the queen's rules, she leaves us alone."

"Couldn't you keep it casual like the rest of us?" Scald added. "I have three girlfriends right now and everyone's perfectly happy and *not* serious. And *safe*." He lifted his claws as Dune swept around them. Six-Claws slid another pitcher of cider onto the table.

"But Palm was different," Smolder cried. "I loved her. We would have gone away forever and never come back! Mother didn't ever have to see us again!" He lifted his head and turned teary, pleading eyes to Six-Claws. "Have you heard anything? Do you know where she is?"

"No," Six-Claws admitted uncomfortably. "I'm sorry." He was glad he didn't know. He felt very grateful that he hadn't been one of the soldiers sent to deal with Smolder's true love.

"Smolder, come on," Singe said, sitting down beside him and putting one wing over his younger brother's back. "You're not an idiot. You know perfectly well she's dead."

"She *isn't*," Smolder yelled, flinging him off. "She can't be! Mother is cruel but she wouldn't do *that*."

"Of course she would," Scald said. "Do you really not remember our aunts? And how they vanished in this exact same way?"

Six-Claws retreated to the far wall, where he could stare out the window.

He didn’t like to be reminded of the terrible things Queen Oasis had done to hang on to her throne — and whatever she’d done to Palm hit a little too close to home. He *knew* Palm. She’d worked in the kitchens with his father for a little while, back before both his father and Char had died from the weird sickness that swept the palace a few years ago.

Palm was a sweet, clever, nervous dragon who adored Smolder and was terrified of the queen. She would never have raised dragonets to challenge Oasis. He was sure she would have happily disappeared into the desert with Smolder and never bothered the queen again.

But they’d been caught while they were trying to elope, and now Palm had really disappeared, most likely never to bother anyone ever again.

He sighed, staring out at the three crescent moons that carved up the sky. A shadow flashed overhead, huge and moving fast. Was that … the queen? Flying out of the palace at this hour of the night?

That was strange.

“Why doesn’t she just *kill me, too*?” Smolder wailed. There was another thump, and another crash of glass splintering.

Dune sidled up beside Six-Claws. “Hey. Did you hear what General Needle said about me today?”

“Something admiring, I assume.” Six-Claws smiled at his friend. After all these years, they were still paired together by everyone, for everything. Six-Claws had risen to colonel in the SandWing army, and Dune was always a few steps behind him — a captain at the moment, but sure to become a major any day.

“She said I have more promise than any officer she’s ever seen.” Dune lifted his chin, glowing with pride. “She said I have extraordinarily strong wings for a SandWing — almost like a SkyWing’s! She said I’d be commanding armies of my own in no time.”

“She’s right,” Six-Claws agreed. “Do you smell something weird?”

“No,” said Dune, sounding ruffled. “Can we get back to talking about how amazing I am, please?”

Six-Claws stuck his nose out the window, sniffing. “It smells like … mammal. But not one of the usual desert animals.”

Suddenly a fierce roar tore through the night. A blast of fire lit up the sky beyond the palace wall, followed by more roaring, wild and agonized as

though someone was being murdered.

"What is *that*?" Dune cried.

In the room behind them, all three princes were on their feet, blinking and startled.

"It sounded like Mother," said Scald. "But I thought she was asleep."

"Let's go find out." Six-Claws darted out of the room with the others behind him. They raced to the nearest courtyard, opened their wings, and flowed over the palace rooftops. The roaring had stopped, leaving only echoes like shredded holes in the air.

Other dragons joined them, calling to one another in confusion, and so it was a fair crowd that came over the top of the outer walls together …

… and found the queen lying dead in the sand.

Somebody shrieked, a long wordless cry of rage. It might have been Scald, or it might have been Six-Claws's mother, Ostrich, now pushing past everyone to crouch beside the body. It might have been both of them, or himself, or everyone together.

"Who did this?" Ostrich yelled. "Who killed our queen?"

"Was there a duel?" another dragon asked. "Did I miss it?"

"I didn't hear about a challenge," Singe answered, looking around blankly. "In the middle of the night? Out here? With no witnesses?"

Burn suddenly landed with a violent *thump* on the sand, knocking two dragons over. She stormed forward and glared down at the queen's corpse, quivering with rage.

Ostrich swallowed and took a step back, dipping her head to signal cautious respect.

Burn just stood there, breathing heavily.

After a moment, Ostrich ventured, "Was it you, Your Highness? Are you now our queen?"

Burn growled, low and deep in her throat. "No," she snarled. "I didn't kill her." Ostrich started to raise her head and Burn snapped, "But it wasn't Blister either! I just saw her!"

"Was it … Blaze, then?" someone in the crowd asked.

There was an awkward pause as everyone tried to imagine the queen's spacey daughter successfully attacking her. Six-Claws looked around and realized Blaze wasn't even there. *She probably slept right through all this*

noise. Wearing jeweled earplugs or buried in expensive pillows.

"It wasn't any of us," Blister's voice said icily from a shadow near the palace wall. She stalked across the sand, flicking her tail menacingly. "Mother wasn't killed by *any* of her daughters."

She faced Burn across the queen's body, each of them sizzling with coiled tension. Burn was older and bigger than Blister, with more battle experience and the scars to show for it. But Six-Claws knew that Blister was smarter … and that made him truly unsure who would win in a fight.

"So …" Singe asked carefully. "If none of you killed her … then, um … who's our next queen?"

Blister hissed, dragging one claw through the sand. "I was going to challenge her soon," she said.

"So was I," Burn snapped back.

Six-Claws wondered if that was true for either of them. As scary as they were, he couldn't imagine either of them defeating Queen Oasis.

But clearly *someone* had. Why would anyone murder the queen, unless it was to get her throne?

Revenge, his mind whispered. Beyond his sisters, lit by the pale moonlight, Smolder's eyes were shining. He was nothing but happy to see his mother dead.

But Six-Claws had been with Smolder when they'd heard the roars. Even if Smolder had wanted to kill his mother for what happened to Palm, he couldn't have done it tonight.

"Maybe you two should fight right now," Scald suggested to his sisters. "Whoever wins gets to be queen. That seems fair, right?"

Blister shot him an unreadable but unpleasant look.

"Not exactly fair to Blaze, though," Singe pointed out, and got his own withering glare from both sisters. "Yeah, all right, I know. You two duke it out."

The idea made sense to Six-Claws. A simple fight to the death, the way it had always been, with an obvious winner. The SandWings needed a queen. They should get it over with.

Years later, Six-Claws would often try to imagine how history might have turned out if the sisters had fought that night. He could never decide if it would have been better — no twenty-year war — or worse — one of these

two as queen of the SandWings, unchallenged and unstoppable.

Burn curled her talons, ready to lunge at her sister.

"This hardly seems like the time or place," Blister said calmly, taking a slight step away from Burn. "I mean, priorities, my dear brothers. Surely first we *must* find out who did this to our poor beloved mother." She tilted her head at Burn and whispered, "Besides, we don't have the Eye of Onyx."

Not many dragons heard her, but Six-Claws was close enough to catch her words. He didn't understand them, though. There was an Eye of Onyx in the treasury, but what did that have to do with dueling for the throne?

"Right," Burn said, slowly opening her claws again. "Of course. Who killed our mother. That's what we need to figure out," she said, raising her voice to address all the gathered dragons. "Admit it now, whoever did this! Don't make us start gouging out your eyes!"

A shuffling flutter ran through the crowd as everyone stared at everyone else, searching for a guilty expression or bloody talons.

Bloody talons, Six-Claws thought. *How did the queen die?* He looked down at the sand around the body, searching for clues. He noticed that the odd mammal smell was stronger out here. And then he saw for the first time that there was a small spear sticking out of the queen's eye.

He crouched, peering closer. It wasn't a dragon-sized spear; it was only about as long as his foreleg and so thin he could probably snap it between his teeth. Was this what had killed her? This tiny thing?

He scanned the rest of her body for other wounds and discovered the strangest thing of all.

Someone had cut off her venomous tail barb.

"Three moons," he said. "Who would —"

"Search the area," Burn commanded. She seemed to be swelling to twice her normal size, her wings flaring and her voice suddenly ringing like a queen's. "Whoever did this can't have gotten far. We will find them and punish them!"

The SandWings immediately spread out and started shooting flames into all the shadows or poking the dunes with their tails. Their shouts and growls filled the night, and Six-Claws thought he would not want to be the murderer, hiding somewhere nearby. Even anything that wasn't the murderer, like a desert rat, was liable to get stomped by a crusading dragon tonight.

He stared at the small spear again.

Everything started to click into place in his brain.

That scent …

The spear was too small for dragons … but there was one other animal that was rumored to use spears.

An animal notorious for trying to steal treasure from dragons, no matter how often they got eaten in the process.

“Hey!” Smolder shouted, digging in a sand dune several feet away. “I found something!”

Burn’s head snapped up. “What is it?” she barked.

“It’s —” Smolder stopped and looked up, confusion written all over his face. “It’s a scavenger.”

The next few years passed in an exhausting blur. Six-Claws was one of the dragons who chased down the scavengers that had escaped with the queen’s tail barb and the stolen treasure; he was there when Burn set their dens on fire and burned all the scavengers’ homes to the ground. He helped to hunt through the ashes and then, when they found no treasure, flew back to the palace behind Burn, only to discover that the SandWing treasury had been completely emptied. Four rooms full of gems and gold — all of it gone, vanished into thin air, presumably stolen by the scavengers, although no one could figure out how or where they’d put it.

He was there for the councils and arguments and trials that followed, everyone fighting over who should be the next queen and how it should be decided. He was in the palace the night that Blister took off with half the army, and he was there the night Blaze escaped and fled north with a squadron of loyal guards. In fact, both times he was approached by friends and fellow soldiers, asking him to join them in supporting the dragon they wanted to be queen.

But he said no. His mother had decided to be loyal to Burn, so he was going to do the same thing. He didn’t like Burn … but he liked her sisters much less. Burn, at least, would be a strong queen, unlike Blaze, and a queen with no secret malevolent plans, which was more than he could say for Blister.

It turned out, though, that there was one thing Burn loved more than

mutilating animals, and that was war. When she heard that Blister was negotiating alliances with the SeaWings and MudWings, intending to bring their armies with her to fight for the SandWing throne, Burn was horribly delighted. As she said to General Needle, in Six-Claws's presence, two sisters out there lurking and scheming was just annoying — but armies coming to attack her, *that* she could handle. *That* meant violence and mayhem and fun.

She sent Prince Smolder to the Sky Kingdom immediately to forge an alliance with their queen, Scarlet. She also tried to contact the IceWings, which was how she discovered that they were protecting Blaze and considering joining the new war themselves.

"I hope they do!" Burn cried gleefully, storming through the construction going on outside the palace. Queen Oasis had been buried where she fell, and a monument was raised over her grave. Burn had ordered another layer of thick walls built all around the outside, beyond the monument, turning the palace into an unassailable stronghold. "More dragons to fight! More territory to conquer! We'll crush them all in a matter of weeks!"

It wasn't a matter of weeks. The war dragged on, and on, and on for years, and in that time Six-Claws saw his mother and way too many of his friends die in battle, and he fought way too many faces he had once considered brothers-in-arms.

But he kept fighting. He did as he was ordered. He was promoted, and then promoted again, until he became General Six-Claws. He stayed loyal to Queen Burn, because loyalty ran deep in his blood … and because he didn't see any other choice.

It was getting harder, though. When Burn had her brother Singe killed for, as far as Six-Claws could tell, "annoying her," he felt his soul sinking further into despair.

What kind of dragon was he following?

He couldn't imagine describing her good qualities, the way he had once been able to list all the things that were great about Queen Oasis. He was having a hard time coming up with even one, these days.

One night about two weeks after Singe's death, Six-Claws flew back to camp with his battalion after a particularly crushing battle with the IceWings in which he'd lost four good dragons.

And more than that, perhaps even worse: Dune had been badly injured.

Dune, the one dragon who had stayed by his side and survived all these years. One of his forearms had been bitten nearly in two and his wing had been hit by a blast of frostbreath. Six-Claws hoped there was still time to reverse the damage and heal his friend. He helped carry Dune all the way back from the battle site.

They'd set up their small city of tents not far from where the desert shifted into rocky hills, then tundra and the Ice Kingdom. Technically the rocky terrain was part of the Kingdom of Sand, so he could have made camp even closer to the IceWing border. But his dragons needed to sleep on sand and return to the desert at night for their morale. If he'd forced them farther north, they might have had shorter flights to their battles, but they would have been cold and miserable and tired, and it would have been too easy to wear them down.

He didn't like wasting dragons.

"You'll be all right, Dune," he whispered in his friend's ear as they flew. "We're almost there. They'll fix you and you'll be flying again in no time. Just hang on."

They landed beside the medical tent in the center of camp, and three dragons immediately emerged, clustering around Dune.

"He needs heat on that wound, and fast," Six-Claws said, pointing to the glistening ice crystals and blue-black scales along the edge of Dune's wing. "Do everything you can for him."

"Of course, sir," one of them answered.

"He might lose the foot," said another, studying Dune's damaged foreleg, "but he needs his wings more. We can save those."

"Yes, we can heal injuries like this, sir," said the last one, indicating the frostbreath gently. "We've done it before. It's not too bad."

"Thank you," said Six-Claws. They whisked Dune away into the tent.

Six-Claws wanted to follow, but he couldn't. There was too much to do. Dragons he had to see and dispatches he needed to read and —

He turned around and found Queen Burn looming behind him.

"Your Majesty," he said with a bow.

"Still alive," she commented.

"Me?" he said. "Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Show me your claws again," she ordered.

He forced himself not to sigh. This happened every time he saw her; he should be over how sick and uncomfortable it made him feel. He held out his front talons.

“Yessss,” Burn hissed, taking them in hers and staring at them greedily. She tugged on his sixth claw on each side and eyed his face to see if he’d react. He kept his expression blank.

“Your soldiers remember their orders, do they?” Burn said. “When you die in battle, they know they are to cut off your arms and bring them to me.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” he said. It took all his considerable training to keep still instead of yanking his talons away from her. “They know. They won’t forget.” How could they forget a gruesome order like that? Everyone knew exactly what she wanted to do with Six-Claws’s talons. One day, when he died, she would happily dismember him and preserve his odd-looking claws in her creepy weirdling tower, along with all the other strange and horrible things she’d collected over the years.

Burn finally dropped his talons with a snort. “Well, as long as you’re still alive, you’d better make yourself useful. We’re going to attack the MudWings. Pack everyone up. We move out tomorrow.”

“What?” Six-Claws blurted.

“Don’t disappoint me by being deaf and slow as well,” she growled. “The MudWings. We’re attacking them. As soon as possible.” She chuckled. “My spies tell me there’s been a rift between the SeaWings and the MudWings. Blister’s alliance is falling apart. This is the time to attack! If we strike now, we can intimidate the MudWings into joining *our* side. Then we’ll be unstoppable.”

“But wait,” Six-Claws said. “What about our plan? The whole strategy we worked out?”

“*Your* plan, you mean,” said Burn. “I know, I know. Focus our energy here until we find Blaze and kill her, so we only have one enemy instead of two.” She yawned. “Boring. You haven’t found Blaze yet and I hate waiting.”

“We’ve only been looking for a few weeks,” Six-Claws protested. “They’re fighting hard to keep her hidden. I’m sure today’s battle was close to her hiding spot.”

He’d never admitted his secret hope, of course. What he really wanted was for one sister to die so the other two could fight it out — just the two of

them in a regular duel, with no armies or soldiers or other tribes or innocent bystanders dragged into the mess. He wanted this to be *over.*

And for that, his strategy made the most sense. If they kept pounding away at Blaze's IceWing alliance, surely they would find her soon.

"You know," Burn sneered, "if you want Blaze dead so badly, perhaps you shouldn't have saved her life all those years ago." She flicked her tail at the shouts of pain coming from the medical tent. "Maybe all of this is *your* fault."

Six-Claws clenched his talons, trying not to reveal that he'd had that exact thought himself over several sleepless nights.

"Your Majesty," he said as calmly as he could. "I strongly believe that we should stick with our current strategy."

"Well, *I* strongly believe that we should go kill some MudWings," she said. "And *I* am your queen, so that means *I* always win."

"Can we discuss this?" he asked. He didn't want to sound as though he was begging, but maybe that was what she wanted him to do. "I can show you the maps — our deductions — our next steps — we have it all worked out."

"You disloyal worm," Burn snarled. "I can see you need a little extra persuasion." She pushed past him and shoved her way into the medical tent.

He started to follow her, but suddenly there was a hiss from the shadows beside the tent.

"Who's there?" he said, pausing. It was impossible to see past the light of the torches, but he could tell there was a dragon hiding in the dark.

A pause, and then an unfamiliar voice said, "Someone with your best interests at heart."

"Show yourself," Six-Claws ordered. Perhaps it could be one of his soldiers, but he thought he'd recognize all their voices. Was it someone sent by one of Burn's sisters to attack her?

If so, it was bad, it was very, very bad that a part of him was tempted not to stop them.

"You don't have to follow Burn," whispered the voice. "She doesn't deserve it."

"Who should I follow instead?" Six-Claws asked. "I suppose you have someone in mind. Blister?"

"Dear snakes, no," said the hidden dragon, with what sounded like genuine amusement. "Why follow any of them? There's always the Scorpion

Den, right? Plenty of SandWings there who don't fight for anyone. From what I've heard anyhow."

"Deserters," Six-Claws said. "That's not me. I'm loyal."

"Loyal to what?" asked the dragon. "Do you even know why you follow her anymore? She's not a good queen. You are helping a viper and making her stronger and more poisonous. Can't you see that?" He paused. "If you can't, you will soon, I'm afraid."

"SIX-CLAWS!" Burn roared from inside the tent. "Get in here!"

"Think about it," the dragon in the shadows whispered, and then he seemed to melt away, and when Six-Claws blinked, there was no one there at all.

He pushed through the flaps into the tent and found Burn standing over Dune.

Six-Claws's friend was lying on a low pile of blankets, unconscious, with his wings spread out on either side of him. Sacks filled with fire-heated stones were packed around the frostbreath injury on his wing and also around his front leg. Here, in the torchlight, Six-Claws could see the wounds more clearly, and he saw that an IceWing must have raked Dune with her serrated claws as well.

But his wing would heal and he would fly again. The doctors said they could fix him. He'd be all right.

"This is the little toad who follows you around, isn't it?" Burn asked. She jabbed one of the hot stone bags so it slid off Dune's wing.

Six-Claws started forward. "He needs that —"

"Don't move," Burn snarled. She pushed another healing pack off the injured dragon, and Dune made a small noise of pain, but didn't wake up. Behind Burn, one of the doctors was wringing her talons like she wanted to intervene but didn't dare.

"Please. Don't hurt him," Six-Claws said, his stomach twisting. "He's a loyal soldier to you."

"And what are you?" Burn demanded. "Tell me, where are we going tomorrow?"

Six-Claws hesitated. He felt as if there was a possible end to this war slipping right between his talons. "I'll do what you say, Your Majesty. I will. But if I could have just one more day to look for Blaze —"

Burn slammed her talons down on Dune's injured wing. Dune came awake screaming as the frozen parts snapped off completely, leaving only misshapen, blackened ruin. Burn sliced her claws through the tendons and membranes, destroying what was left of the wing.

"*No!*" Six-Claws heard himself shouting, felt himself tackled by the other SandWings in the tent as he lunged toward the queen.

"Unquestioning obedience," Burn said to him. "That's really all I ask." She kicked Dune aside and shook the blood off her claws. "So, General. Where are we going tomorrow?"

There were at least three dragons pinning him down. Six-Claws took a deep breath, forcing away his guilt and fury and disbelief. "The Mud Kingdom," he said into the ground.

"Much better." Burn stepped over him, nearly smacking him in the face with her deadly tail. "You're lucky you're such a useful general, or I would just take those fascinating talons for my tower and be done with these boring arguments. Oh, and Six-Claws." She stopped in the opening of the tent and looked back at him. "The next time you feel like questioning my orders, remember that your friend there has another wing … and a tail … and three working legs, all of which could meet with even more horrible accidents. Understood?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Six-Claws couldn't look at her. He kept his eyes closed and his face in the sand until he heard her leaving the tent and her heavy footsteps treading away.

"We're sorry, sir," said one of the nurses, climbing off him. "We didn't want her to kill you."

"I understand," he said as they all let go and backed away nervously. He staggered to his feet and over to Dune, who had mercifully passed out again. His wing was a wreck, far beyond saving, and his foreleg was a bloody stump. Six-Claws knelt beside him and gently touched Dune's head. "Is there anything you can do for him?" he asked the other dragons.

They tried. He could see how hard they were trying. He didn't leave Dune's side as they bandaged and swabbed and did what they could. His other duties had all faded into a blur in the back of his mind.

The Scorpion Den.

You are helping a viper.

Think about it.

"It's getting late, sir." One of the doctors brushed Six-Claws's wing with her own. "You should get some sleep."

"I'm not going to sleep," he said. "I'm getting Dune out of here. As far away from *her* as I can get him."

The doctor glanced around and Six-Claws realized they were alone, apart from Dune; the other SandWings had left without him realizing it.

"Where are you going?" she whispered. She was the one who'd thought about stopping Burn; he remembered the horror and pity in her eyes. He'd seen her before, taking care of other patients. She was always calm and efficient. He liked that about her, even though he didn't really know her.

"The Scorpion Den, I think," he whispered back. He rubbed his eyes. "I'll have to carry him."

"I'll help you," she said. "If — if you don't mind me coming with you."

He could use the help — Dune was too heavy to carry far on his own. But he shook his head. "It's too dangerous," he said. "You'd be a deserter, like us. Burn would kill you if she caught you."

"Apparently she might kill me even if I stay right here," the doctor said wryly. "I'd rather go with you. I trust you."

"You don't know me at all," he said.

"Of course I do," she answered. "You're General Six-Claws."

"It'll just be Six-Claws from now on," he said. "I don't know your name."

"Kindle," she said. "Let's go now, before anyone comes back."

They wrapped Dune in blankets and lifted him between them as carefully as they could. Outside, the temperature had dropped to almost freezing, and most dragons were huddled in their tents. No one questioned Six-Claws and Kindle as they carried their burden to the outskirts of the encampment.

"General, sir," said the dragon on guard duty, snapping back her wings as they approached.

"We're taking this dragon back to the stronghold for more advanced medical treatment," Six-Claws said.

"Do you want me to take him?" the soldier offered. "You should rest, shouldn't you, sir?"

"I'll be fine," said Six-Claws. "But thank you."

"Yes, sir," she answered. "I hope he's all right."

Kindle took one side of the blankets and Six-Claws took the other, and with Dune slung between them, they lifted off into the night sky.

I'm sorry to leave you, Six-Claws thought at the soldier on guard duty … at all the soldiers he had to leave behind. He felt like the lowest snake in the sandpit, abandoning his position and all the dragons who'd counted on him.

But the dragon in the shadows was right. Six-Claws was helping a monster rise to power, and he couldn't do it anymore. Especially not if it meant Dune would have to live in constant danger.

He'd try to find a way to save the others. Maybe he could get more of them out, anyone who wished to be free of Burn or the other two sisters. Maybe together they could make the Scorpion Den a safe place for dragons who wanted no part of this war.

Dune shifted in the blankets and Six-Claws had to adjust his wingbeats to the way his weight rolled. He glanced down and saw Dune looking up at him with bleak, haunted eyes.

Not at Six-Claws — at his wings, powering steadily through the air. The way Dune's never would again.

"I'm sorry, Dune," Six-Claws said.

Dune didn't respond for a long time. Finally he asked, "Where are we going?"

"To the Scorpion Den," Six-Claws answered. "I'm taking you somewhere I hope Burn will never find us."

"Burn." Dune let out a bitter laugh. "You always said it was so important to be loyal. I guess we've learned something about loyalty, haven't we?"

Six-Claws beat his wings in silence for a moment. "Yes," he agreed at last.

"That it's stupid," Dune said, "and *we* were stupid for being loyal in the first place, and now we're paying for it. I'm paying for it. There's no point to any of this."

"No, that's not it," Six-Claws said. "We were loyal to the wrong dragon, that's all. I see that now."

"Oh, good," Dune said sarcastically, stuffing his nose into the blankets. "Just in time."

"We'll be more cautious in the future," Six-Claws said. The sun was starting to rise off to his left, casting dazzling sunspots in the corners of his

eyes. “We’ll find a dragon we can truly trust and respect, and then we’ll have a reason to be loyal. I believe that dragon exists. You’ll see.”

“Wonderful,” Dune muttered. “Can’t wait.”

Six-Claws glanced over at Kindle. She was blinking away tears, outlined by the halo of the rising sun.

“I hope you’re right,” she said.

“Me too,” he said, and they flew on together, south toward the Scorpion Den, toward an uncertain future, toward that tiny thread of hope.

Keep reading for a sneak peek of

WINGS OF FIRE

LEGENDS: DARKSTALKER

THE FIRST-EVER SPECIAL EDITION IN THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING WINGS OF FIRE SERIES

DARKSTALKER

His earliest memory was the voices that came from outside the darkness.

"Are you sure it's time? Now? Tonight?"

"Yes. NightWing mothers always know. And it's the brightest night, like Foreseer said it would be. Three full moons … we haven't had a thrice-moonborn dragonet in over a century! Snakes and centipedes, *quit pacing*. It makes me want to bite your ear off."

"Try anything like that and I'll enchant all your teeth to fall out."

A slight pause. "Arctic. *I* was just kidding."

"Right. Me too."

He couldn't understand the words yet, but he was flooded with the emotions that poured from both minds. One (*Mother,* he knew without knowing) was absorbed with worry, protective, ready to love and defend and rage at a moment's turn. The other radiated resentment and cold anger, rotten around the edges.

A scratching noise, and he felt the world tilting. Suddenly there was light, dim and soft but there, beyond the wall he had only just discovered around him. The light was calling him: *Come out, come out. Come out* now.

"Why are you moving them?" the angry voice demanded. "We leave ours buried in the snow."

"Ours have to hatch in the moonlight," Mother answered. "Stop scowling at me. It's completely safe. NightWings have been doing this for hundreds of years."

There was a sharp, loud tap near his ear.

“Don’t touch them!”

A dizzying rush of motion, followed by warmth and stillness.

“Why are they two different colors?” asked the voice he didn’t like, as loud and splintery and jagged as the tap had been. “Is it because of us? Maybe that one’s more of an IceWing?”

“No,” she said. “Most NightWing eggs are black, but the ones that hatch under full moons turn silver like this. I don’t know why that one’s still black. They should hatch at the same time.”

“Something is wrong with it,” he muttered.

“Nothing,” said Mother, “is *wrong* with *my dragonets.*”

The world tilted again, and he felt himself settling into a place that wouldn’t roll or shift so easily when he moved.

Now he could sense something else — another heartbeat, slow and steady and very close by. He reached for her mind, but there was only peace and quiet there. None of the urgency to escape that he felt. He knew he didn’t have forever. *Now,* that’s what he had, *only now.*

“We’re up too high,” grumbled the angry voice. “They could fall. This is a stupid tradition. We should have taken them back to the Ice Kingdom to hatch.”

“So they could freeze the moment they came out?” Mother said acerbically.

“They wouldn’t,” he growled. “They *are* half IceWing, remember.”

“And your mother would have been *so* pleased to meet them,” she snapped. “At least my family won’t kill our dragonets on sight. They’ll help us protect them.”

“Your family has nothing to complain about. I brought royal IceWing blood to their line.”

Mother hissed dangerously. “I see. I’m so sorry about mixing it with my peasant NightWing blood.”

A burst of violence, of bloody scales and frozen claws, flashed through the dragonet’s mind. His mother was in danger. Bad things were about to happen. But he could stop it. He just had to come out *now.*

He pressed his talons hard against the walls around him, shoving and kicking and straining. A satisfying *crack,* and the sensation of something giving way beneath his back claws.

“He’s coming, look.” It worked. They were both distracted from their anger, especially Mother, all her thoughts now on her dragonet, her mind shimmering with excitement.

He tried to reach the quiet heartbeat again. If he’d had the words, he would have thought *Come out with me! Just try! You have to fight!*

But he didn’t have those words yet, and she wasn’t listening in any case.

“There’s a storm coming. Does that make a difference to your moon superstitions?”

“I don’t think so, but it doesn’t matter. He’ll be out before it gets here. Look how strong he is.” A moment, a pulse where they almost shared the same emotion, and then she added, “They’re not *superstitions*, by the way. You don’t have to be a rhinoceros nostril just because you don’t understand something.”

The danger flashed before him again. Time to fight harder. He dug in his claws and squirmed, pushing in every direction at once.

The light, the light, the light wanted him out, wanted to run its talons over his wings, drip through his scales, fill him with silver power. He wanted that power, too, all of it, all of it.

CRACK-CRACK-CRACK.

The walls fell away.

The moons poured in.

Three silver eyes in the sky, huge and perfectly round, with darkness all around them. It felt as if they were sinking into his chest, melting into his eyes. He wanted to scoop them into his talons and swallow them whole.

He was in a carved stone nest lined with black fur, at the peak of a sharp promontory. Another egg sat quietly in the nest, nearly camouflaged against the fur and the shadows.

Below him stretched a vast landscape of caverns and ravines, glowing with firelight and echoing with the flutter of wings. It looked as though a giant dragon had raked the ground with her claws, digging secret canyons and caves into the rock all across the terrain, some of them stretching toward the starlit sea in the distance.

After several heartbeats he realized there were two large dragons behind him, their wings drawn tight against the wind that buffeted them all. One was black as the night, one pale as the moons. He glanced down at his scales, but

he didn’t have to see their color to know he belonged with the dark one. That was Mother. She sparked with anger from snout to tail, but there was immense room inside her for love, and she adored him already, heart and soul. He could feel it. It filled him like the moonlight did, setting the world quickly into understandable shapes in his head. He loved her, too, immediately and forever.

The danger came from the white dragon. This was Father, some kind of partner to the dragon who cared. The newly hatched dragonet could hardly look at him without seeing a spiral of confusing flashes: pain, fury, screaming dragons, and blood, everywhere, blood. This white dragon had done something terrible that haunted him, and he might do worse someday. Father’s mind had patches of damp, rotten vileness all over it.

The dragonet immediately wanted to turn him into a fireball and blow his ashes away. But inside Father, hidden under layers of ice, pulsed a small, warm ember of love for Mother. That was the thing that saved him.

Wait and see, thought the dragonet. He did not understand yet that he could see the future. He had no idea what the flashes meant. He couldn’t follow the paths that were unfolding in his brain; cause and effect and consequences were all still beyond him. But in his mother’s mind he found the idea of hope, and in his father’s mind he traced the outline of something called patience.

He could wait. There was much still to come between him and this father-shaped dragon.

“Darkstalker,” said Mother. “Hello, darling.” She held out her talons and he climbed into them willingly, content to be closer to that warmth.

“Darkstalker?” Father snorted. “You must be joking. That’s the creepiest name I’ve ever heard.”

“It is *not*,” she snapped, and the dragonet bared his teeth in sympathy, but neither of them noticed. “The darkness is his prey. He chases back the dark, like a hero.”

“Sounds more like he creeps *through* the dark. Like a *stalker*.”

“Stop being horrible. It’s not up to you. In my kingdom, mothers choose their dragonets’ names.”

“In *my* kingdom, the dragon with the highest rank in the family chooses the dragonets’ names and the queen must approve them.”

“And of course you think your ‘rank’ is higher than mine,” she snarled. “But we’re not in your kingdom. My dragonets will never set foot in your frozen wasteland. We are here, whether you like it or not, and he is my son, and his name is Darkstalker.”

Father’s eyes, like fragments of ice, studied Darkstalker’s every scale, and Darkstalker could feel the cold, congealing weight of Father’s resentment.

“He looks every inch a NightWing,” Father growled. “Not a shred of me in him at all.”

Suspicion, hatred, outrage flashing on both sides, but none of it spoken.

“Fine,” said Father at last. “You can have your sinister little Darkstalker. But I want to name the other one.”

Mother hesitated, glancing at the unhatched egg, which was still black. Darkstalker listened as her mind turned it over, already half detached. She wasn’t sure anyone would ever come out of that egg. She was ready to give all her love to Darkstalker, her perfect thrice-moonborn dragonet. All of it, and he was ready to take it.

But Darkstalker knew his sister was in that egg. Alive, but not restless. Quiet. She didn’t care for the moons that had called him forth. She couldn’t hear them.

Something tingled in his claws.

He could change that.

He could touch her egg and summon her. He knew it, somehow; he could see in his mind how her egg would turn silver under his talons, how it would splinter and crack open as she scrambled out. He could see the beautiful, odd-looking dragonet that would come out, and he could see the moons sharing their power with her, too.

Then they would be the same. She would be born under three moons as well. She would have the same power as him … and the same love from Mother.

Which he already had to share with the undeserving ice monster across from him.

No. This was his. All he had to do was nothing. His sister would come out in her own time, tomorrow when the moons were no longer full. Then he would be the only special one.

“All right,” said Mother. “If that egg hatches, you can name the dragonet

inside. Only … remember she has to grow up in the NightWing tribe. It'll be hard enough — just, try to be kind, is all. Think of her future and how she'll need to fit in."

Father nodded, seething internally at being instructed like a low-ranked dragonet in training.

She'll be all right, Darkstalker thought. A thousand futures dropped away before him as he made his first choice. Futures where his sister joined his quest for power; futures where she fought him and stopped him; futures where they were best friends; futures where one of them killed the other, or vice versa. As Darkstalker folded his talons together, choosing to keep them still for tonight, every possible future with a thrice-moonborn sister disappeared.

He saw them blink out, and although he didn't know exactly what it meant, he felt somehow a tiny bit safer, a tiny bit bigger and stronger.

Sorry, little sister, he thought, not in so many words, but with visions of his future cascading through his mind. *This is my mother. Those are my full moons.*

This is my world now.

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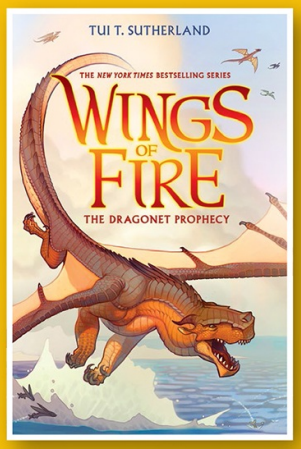

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